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**Was Z.Y. KUO (Guo Renyuan) a radical behaviourist?**

by

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**Biographical Note.**

Geoffrey H. BLOWERS is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Psychology at the University of Hong Kong. He has published papers on the reception of psychology and psychoanalysis in Hong Kong and China, is co-editor with Alison Turtle of a volume of papers on the spread of western psychology in Asia and Oceania, *Psychology Moving East*, and co-author with Kieron O'Connor of the book, *Personal Construct Psychology in the Clinical Context*.

### **Was Z.Y. Kuo (Guo Renyuan) a radical behaviourist?<sup>1</sup>**

In the aftermath of his death in 1970, Kuo Zing Yang was hailed by the author of his obituary as a "radical philosopher and innovative experimentalist". This reputation was acquired from a line a work that stretched back fifty years to Kuo's undergraduate days at Berkeley beginning with a controversial paper challenging the existence of instincts, which attracted responses from William MacDougall, Knight Dunlap, and his own doctoral supervisor, Edward Tolman, amongst others<sup>2</sup>. Following his return to China in 1923, he continued to gather support for his position by undertaking several series of experimental studies examining the occurrence and development of foetal activities in birds and mammals which were published in American journals. Much of this work was done in precarious conditions brought about by the political turmoil in China in the twenties and thirties. Kuo returned to America in 1936 seeking a tenured position, and worked at the Universities of Rochester, Yale and the Carnegie Institution of Washington. Although he stayed and worked for three years he was unable to obtain a permanent post. He returned to China but left for good in 1946 to Hong Kong where he remained until his death, unemployed but supported by his wife who was doctor. During this period he briefly returned to America in 1963 to engage in collaborative research with Gilbert Gottlieb -- the man who would write his obituary<sup>3</sup> -- but otherwise did no more experimental work.

Nevertheless he was far from idle in Hong Kong. From the early fifties right up until his death, he worked on two different book length manuscripts. One, a "confessions", was an autobiography which detailed many aspects of his own life and rounded out a picture of his life and work in a way which neither his obituary or any subsequent account of his work has done. The other, a study of Chinese National Character, was ostensibly an examination of Chinese philosophical texts and contemporary history alongside a mass of data culled from a large number of China emigrants fleeing the communist regime briefly in Hong Kong en route to safer havens.

These works have so far remained unpublished,<sup>4</sup> though Kuo did try to get his autobiography published in his life time.<sup>5</sup> They reveal a more complex man than previous accounts have acknowledged. While the reputation of his work in comparative psychology remains secure<sup>6</sup>, contemporary accounts of his position, this author suggests, are misplaced. Either they were written seemingly in ignorance of the contents of the unpublished manuscripts,<sup>7</sup> or, -- in the case of the obituary from which some later accounts have been culled -- were based on a partial reading of them to confirm a view of Kuo as a lone scientist, struggling to develop his project in an intellectually alien environment under almost impossible conditions.

A closer reading of the manuscripts however, suggests that Kuo was torn between his scientific work and the role he was called on to play in university administration. This was a role he confessed to disliking but his own account shows the extent to which he was clearly involved<sup>8</sup>. He had been President of two universities, and been asked to consider taking a position in the ministry of education after the Second World War if the Nationalists should have come to power.<sup>9</sup> He also entertained hopes, during the war years, of being considered for the role of China's ambassador to Britain. In short, although claiming to be non political in outlook, Kuo was a more political animal than he cared to admit. This split between the academic and the administrator with high ambitions, partly dashed, is an indicator of the ambivalence he felt towards his own country. And this set the tone for his project on Chinese national character, seeing the collective mind of China's youth under threat from a powerful Communist regime. In spite of the success and achievements of his work in comparative psychology, the two unpublished works, taken together, also suggest Kuo's "radical behaviourism" was a convenient rationale for his laboratory animal work, but not otherwise a deeply held philosophical belief. To the contrary, in his discourse on national character he frequently makes reference to instinctual aspects of the collective personality upon which political forces can be brought to bear.<sup>10</sup>

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## Notes

1. The following have made contributions to this ongoing research and I am indebted to all: Nadine Lambert, Barbara Glendenning of Tolman Hall Library, and Carol Soc, Assistant to Dean of Studies, all at the University of California, Berkeley for their help in locating material relevant to Kuo's time at Berkeley; Karen Ochsenhirt and John Popplestone, Archives of History of American Psychology for Tolman and Macfarlane correspondence; Serena Yang and Ronda Cheung for their translations of Chinese source documents; Winston Hsieh of the Dept. of History, U. of Missouri, and Sun Longji, Department of History, Memphis State University for sharing their thoughts on Kuo; Gilbert Gottlieb, Research Professor of Psychology at the Centre for Developmental Science, University of North Carolina for his recollections and several secondary sources; and also, and most especially to the following members of Kuo's family for their reminiscences: Portia Sheen, Alex Kuo, Kuo Xiaoyuan, Ida Yu, and Mimi Cary.
2. Kuo (1921) Giving up instincts in psychology. *Journal of Philosophy* 18 645-664. The responses to this paper came from, Dunlap K. (1922) The identity of instinct and habit, *Journal of philosophy*, 19, 85-94, Geiger, J.R. Must we give up instincts in psychology?, *Journal of philosophy*, 19, 94-98, Hunter, W.S. The modification of instinct, *Journal of philosophy*, 19, 98-101, McDougall, W. (1921-1922) The use and abuse of instinct in social psychology, *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 16, 285-333, Tolman, E.C. (1922) Can instincts be given up in psychology?, *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 17, 139-152, Wesley, R.W. (1921-1922) The value for social psychology of the concept of instinct, *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 16, 334-343.
3. Gottlieb, G. (1972) Zing-Yang Kuo: radical scientific philosopher and innovative experimentalist (1898-1970). *Journal of Comparative and Physiological Psychology* 80 No. 1, 1-10.
4. Entitled "Confessions of a Chinese Scientist" and "Chinese National Character and the Myth of Communism" they have so far remained unpublished though an annotated version of the first of these is being prepared for publication, by an American historian.
5. In the early fifties Kuo had enlisted Tolman's help in getting a publisher. Tolman was initially cautious about possible costs, but also encouraging -- "It seems to us it is just the sort of document which should have appeal at the present moment." (Tolman to Kuo 29th January 1954). He also sought Jean Macfarlane's help, a psychologist from Berkeley and protege of Tolman. Shortly after this however, the ms. was rejected by Basic Books (Rosenthal to Macfarlane, 2nd July 1954). Shortly before his death Kuo wrote to Katherine White Macpherson, Head of the History of American psychology archives, of his intention not to publish either ms. but to distribute selected chapters to friends. (Kuo to White Macpherson, 27th April, 1970). In his 1968 article co-authored with Lam Yut-Hang, "Chinese religious behaviour and the deification of Mao Tse Tung", he referred in a footnote to his "unpublished book", which by now had become, "The Anatomy of Chinese behaviour" (*Psychological Record*

18 455-468). After Kuo's obituary appeared in JCPP, Academic Press expressed interest in it but, as it was critical of Mao, the editor decided not to pursue it as he "did not wish to harm relations with China" (Gottlieb *personal communication* Oct. 22, 1997). Kuo also published in Chinese an article of his "'recollections" of being a behaviourist but these were not autobiographical (Kuo, Z.Y. (1958) [Eng translation: My recollections about behavioristic psychology.] *Contemporary Philosophy and Social Sciences II* n. 3 From the time of his return to Hong Kong after visiting America, Kuo also worked on, and managed to get published, a book on his comparative psychology studies. This appeared in 1967 as *The dynamics of behaviour development; an epigenetic view* New York: Random House. (Subsequently republished by Plenum Press in 1976.)

6. For example, Carl Degler in his *In search of Human nature: the decline and revival of Darwinism in American social thought* (New York: Oxford, 1991) cites Kuo's anti-instinctual views at length, seeing him as one of a handful of people who, in the early twenties, was intent on undermining the concept by championing the cause of experimental work. Kuo's *Dynamics*, is still widely cited. J.R. Kantor, writing a remembrance of Kuo in 1971 used the opportunity to write a review of the book. Ramona Rodriguez and Philip Rodkin's list of citations of *Dynamics* since publication, shows that since 1972 it has been cited between three and nine times in leading scientific journals every year till 1994 (Gottlieb, *personal communication*).

7. Neither Kantor nor Degler refer to Kuo's unpublished manuscripts, nor to what he was working on in the last twenty years of his life. Philip Rodkin's review of Kuo's *Dynamics* thirty years on, saw in Kuo's "holistic behaviorism" a fundamentally traditional behaviourist like Watson, Hull or Skinner, though in Kuo's aim of seeing "how dynamic, multi-level environments and stimuli influence individual development" (p.1087) Rodkin saw connections to "avian communication, comparative methodology, appetite preferences and aggression"; at the same time acknowledging Kuo's lack of attention <sup>to</sup> human cognition. Mark Rilling's entry for the forthcoming *Encyclopedia of psychology* (APA/OUP) follows Gottlieb's account closely, picking up on the Kuo's Chinese background only to link vaguely Kuo's interest in developmental psychology to Buddhism.

8. See, in particular, *Confessions*, ch. 8, "My life as a college president".

9. *Ibid* pages 12-16

10. e.g. in *National Character*, ch. 3, the base of the Confucian intellectual tradition is seen as harboring a motive of learning only to be qualified for government posts rather than to seek for truth (p.4) Later in the same chapter, Mao is referred to as having, "ego-mania symptoms and delusions of grandeur" (p.49). Numerous other examples in the chapter suggest Kuo's recourse to a psychology far removed from radical behaviourism.